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The Word made Flesh:

The Catholic Literary Imagination

Preface:

"People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy"
(Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 107).

I wish to speak here on the topic of orthodoxy—specifically, orthodox Catholicism.

Orthodoxy, though it has as many forms as religions, could best be described as an encounter of a story on the terms of the storytellers. To be an orthodox Ancient Greek polytheist, one would have to encounter the Ancient Greek mythos on the terms of the Pre-Socratics—Hesiod, perhaps Homer. Orthodox Irish paganism would require a belief about the structure of the world based on the authority of the ancient druids. Orthodox Christianity is an encounter with the story of the Christ on the authority of the successors of His apostles—this is what Catholicism has solidly laid claim to for two thousand years.

What does Orthodoxy have to do with literature?

Inasmuch as an orthodox belief stands in contrast with a heterodox belief, orthodoxy is a form of textual interpretation—it is an encounter with a story. However, because the separation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy comes in the form of a definitive extra-textual authority—in the case of Catholicism, the Magisterium of the Church—it is a different kind of textual interpretation than the kind taught in our university.

Furthermore, it is a kind of textual interpretation that is often overlooked, unconsciously avoided, or even overtly dismissed in our current university culture. This is because orthodoxy has the propensity to become infected with intellectual sloth, credulity, and self-righteousness. In believing a story on the terms of the storyteller, it is tempting to stop engaging the story entirely—to place it on an intellectual shelf and idolize it. It is also tempting to place your life on the shelf with the book, and not be willing to engage others.

However, these are temptations associated with orthodoxy, not effects. Orthodoxy does not encourage credulity—it is not a surrender of the intellect to the authority of the storyteller,

but a stimulus of the intellect by the storyteller. It occurs to the hearer not as a command, but as a compelling possibility: “what if this is true? What then?”

The power of this “what then?” imbues all it touches with vigorous new life. Akin to C. S. Lewis’ celestial “further up and further in,” the exploration of the orthodox can and must travel deeper and deeper in understanding and joy, begetting cycles of celebration and further contemplation (*The Last Battle* 167). Orthodoxy, as Chesterton put it in the epigraph that I selected from his book of the same title, is a perilous, exciting task: it requires rapt attention to detail to be orthodox, but it also supplies insights both ancient and new.

An illustration: Saint Justin Martyr, an early second century Catholic, wrote a story which he heard on good authority:

> [I]f anyone says that the writings of Moses and of the rest of the prophets were also written in the Greek character, let him read profane histories, and know that Ptolemy, king of Egypt, when he had built the library in Alexandria, and by gathering books from every quarter had filled it, then learnt that very ancient histories written in Hebrew happened to be carefully preserved; and wishing to know their contents, he sent for seventy wise men from Jerusalem, who were acquainted with both the Greek and Hebrew language, and appointed them to translate the books; and that in freedom from all disturbance they might the more speedily complete the translation, he ordered that there should be constructed, not in the city itself, but seven stadia off(where the Pharos was built), as many little cots as there were translators, so that each by himself might complete his own translation; and enjoined upon those officers who were appointed to this duty, to afford them all attendance, but to prevent communication with one another, in

> order that the accuracy of the translation might be discernible even by their agreement.
>
> And when he ascertained that the seventy men had not only given the same meaning, but had employed the same words, and had failed in agreement with one another not even to the extent of one word; but had written the same things, and concerning the same things, he was struck with amazement, and believed that the translation had been written by divine power, and perceived that the men were worthy of all honor, as beloved of God; and with many gifts ordered them to return to their own country. And having, as was natural, marveled at the books, and concluded them to be divine, he consecrated them in that library. (Justin Martyr Chp. 13).

Saint Justin Martyr is talking about the translation of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was used at the time of Jesus. The translation is named for this story—for the seventy scribes employed in it.

However, there is an associated legend—a legend based on the story St. Justin is telling:

During the translation, one translator planned to translate one word differently than all the others. Specifically, this word was the Hebrew word for 'virgin' in the Isaiah passage which says, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14). In ancient Hebrew, this word (almah) is ambiguous as to whether it means 'virgin' or simply 'young woman.' This translator wanted to render it 'young woman' in Greek—a more precise language that has different words for the two.

However, legend says an angel appeared to him before he had written the word and said that his translation of that word was wrong. "Translate the word as 'parthenos' (Greek for

‘virgin,’ instead of ‘young woman’). For your lack of faith, you will live to see the event spoken of in the passage come to pass,” the angel said.

So the translator did as the angel commanded. He lived until a ripe old age, but did not die. He took to praying in the temple, begging God to let him see the child Emmanuel so he could die in peace according to the angel’s word.

And then one day it happened. “He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

‘Now, Master, you may let your servant go
in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel’” (Luke 2: 27-32).

Legend says that this man’s name was Simeon, and it is he who is recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

This story is emblematic of the character of orthodox literature: along with the Gospels, “there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true,” and of the Gospels, “none which so many sceptical [sic] men have accepted as true on its own merits” (“On Fairy Stories” 89).

Believing in the specific interpretation of the Gospels promulgated by the Catholic Church—the orthodox interpretation—*emphatically* does not shackle the imagination or limit the possibilities of the word. In fact, among authors there are few brighter lights than orthodox Catholics.

The main inspiration for this document lies in the fact that the Catholic literary imagination is strong and vibrant. However, the secondary inspiration is this: that being defiantly unorthodox in academia is too often synonymous with being original, clever, and bright. How it became so academically praiseworthy to avoid a serious encounter with the doctrines of the Church—to dismiss the rich traditions of orthodoxy as sexist, racist, or authoritarian without actually understanding them—I have no idea. But it appalls me how little our academic community knows about the traditions in which our culture is steeped. The motivation to write this document springs from hearing (semester in and semester out) an endless stream of ignorant and dismissive rationales against my religion: Catholic holidays were built on pagan ones; we believe Jesus was a white man with blond hair; the Papacy was instituted by Constantine in the fourth century; best of all, we Catholics are prudish, too-kempt conservatives who know no thrill and no adventure, only guilt, temptation, and a fetish for suffering.

Casual ignorance on any discussed subject should not be the norm in academia. However, it is extremely sad that casual ignorance on this subject—the very founder of the modern university system—is actually in vogue. While most of these instances do not lend themselves to citation, they have existed, in my experience, within both students and faculty.

I cannot rectify this trend alone, but I can ignore it. This document elaborates on the Catholic literary imagination as it has manifested itself in just the past century—four authors specifically: two English and two American, three of them men and one woman, two of them converts in their adult lives and two not, all of them writing as orthodox Catholics.

The above story of Simeon, the Septuagint scribe, should be enough proof that it is possible to be imaginative while still believing a Faith to be true. After this point, we will not stray from this paradigm.

However, this document has also become a defense of the literary imagination within orthodoxy. There are those who, like the unorthodox, believe that orthodoxy is, as Chesterton says, "heavy, humdrum, and safe," and yet still believe in it. Some of these people believe in it precisely *because* they think it is "heavy, humdrum, and safe." For these, fairies are too close to demons for comfort, wizards too close to witches, anarchists too close to terrorists, and torturers too close to masochists. I suspect that for some of these people, baptism may also be too close to drowning, but that's beside the point (although it is the point of a very interesting story by Flannery O'Connor).

What *is* the point of the Catholic literary imagination is that it is both solidly Catholic and solidly literary. From the very beginnings of English literature—sadly, the only genre which I am equipped to deal with—its influence has been felt.

An illustration: *Beowulf,* largely regarded as one of the first extant piece of English literature, was most likely first transcribed by a Catholic monk. Not only were monks the greater part of the few literate people at the time, but monasteries were largely the only institutions with functioning libraries.

That a monk would find *Beowulf* so compelling as to painstakingly write the oral story down is a strong statement for the existence of seemingly pagan fantasy. That Beowulf was Christianized—the character gives praise to the Christian God instead of the more likely pagan gods—yet still fights monsters and dragons, is essential to the important tone set up by the Beowulf poet (*Beowulf* 100; 104-6). "And so Beowulf, for all that he moves in the world of the primitive Heroic Age of the Germans, nevertheless is almost a Christian knight" (Chambers xxviii).

J. R. R. Tolkien, whose lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," put *Beowulf* back on the critical map, says that it is

> through such blending [of Christian and pagan] that there was available to a poet …both new faith and new learning (or education), and also a body of native tradition (itself requiring to be learned) for the changed mind to contemplate together… Almost we might say that this poem was…inspired by the debate that had long been held…shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition? ("Monsters and the Critics" 118; 120).

To think of fiction (as much *Beowulf* as *The Book of the New Sun*, and including the tiny folktale I have already recounted) in Tolkien's terms—as inspired by the debate 'shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition'—requires a simple replacement in terms.

Of pagan mythology, shall we consign the heathen ancestors to perdition? Of a detective novel, shall we consign the suspect? Of fantasy, shall we consign fairies (and other wild imaginings of our beautiful universe)? Of southern gothic, shall we consign the misfit? Of science fiction, shall we consign our own descendants?

Orthodox literary criticism—the Catholic literary imagination—not only fosters imagination through doctrine, but also enables and encourages us to look with love on all the creations of our word, perhaps, in a way, as God does.

Daniel Piscoya

The Feast of Saint Patrick, 2017 A.D.

Introduction:

The Catholic Paradigm on the Spoken Word

"Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'?"
(*New American Bible*, Mark 2:9).

The single most influential thing, concept, and person in Catholicism is Jesus present in the Eucharist. If you ever want to learn about Catholicism, contemplate that Jesus is present to us under the species of bread and wine, and everything else about our religion will fall into place. Once the sacrament of the Eucharist is understood, everything else will be: the reverence we show to priests, the gold in our churches, the authority of the Pope, our affinity for images, the simultaneously rote and seasonal characteristics of our liturgies, every aspect of our creed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that the Eucharist is

> 'the source and summit' of the Christian life. The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. … Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking (CCC 1324-1327).

In a very real sense, the entirety of the visible, tangible Catholic church—the sense of the church that includes its accountants, its administrators, the reams of paper and paychecks behind the spiritual directors, priests, and bishops—exists purely in service of the sacrament.

As a consequence, the Catholic religion differs from the rest of the religions of the world in two delightfully intertwined areas: the possession of an exceptionally robust concept of mystery, and a consequent reverence for the power of the spoken word. Understanding the compatibility of these areas requires understanding the Eucharist and the priest.

This seems to me largely because no other religion I have heard of survives mystery with their reverence for words intact, or can revere words with their sense of mystery intact. It is almost always one or the other—either God is mysterious beyond the power of words to express and is rendered distant, or God is simply words—no mystery at all—and is rendered irrelevant.

For the former, like Judaism or Islam and some sects of Protestant Christianity, God is ineffable, and describing Him as anything but indescribable would seem like limitation and a heresy, if not blasphemy. These religions lean the most towards iconoclasm—no Jew or Muslim would consent to 'picture' God, and some Protestants are not even inclined to do so, citing lack of inspiration or the uselessness of such a gesture. These religions also do not have the Eucharist—the rendering of God into bread and wine.

Another characteristic of these religions is that all their inspiration is literally long gone—their holy texts were inspired, but no inspiration or authority on the religion exists anymore. For the latter category, like atheists, words and pictures are all God is—God isn't too real for words; words were the only thing real about Him. This attitude is most inclined towards the opposite of iconoclasm—nihilism and relativism. For them, words and pictures aren't *too powerful*; they didn't have any power to begin with. These philosophies also do not have priests (although an argument can be made for Bill Nye and Neil deGrasse Tyson)—the rendering of bread and wine into God.

This dichotomy plays itself out across American religious consciousness viciously—conservative puritans waging war against liberal hedonists in a hellishly permanent religio-political landscape. The Catholic paradigm rejects the dichotomy of mystery and spoken word. A religion with the Eucharist is not iconoclast, nor is a religion with a Pope nihilist. Rather, Catholicism holds that an inexpressible God became a very expressive man, and in doing so, gave select men the power that He has, namely, to reshape creation with a word.

So what does this mean for the Catholic paradigm on the spoken word?

As above, an understanding of the impact of Catholic doctrine on the Catholic literary imagination requires an understanding of the Eucharist and the priest.

The Eucharistic Imagination

There is an old Catholic piece of cultural symbolism that vanished after the Second Vatican Council which can describe the significance of the Eucharist: the altar rail. Like the bar in a courtroom, the altar rail used to signify a divide. However, unlike the bar, passing the altar rail was not a feat achieved by study—by an advanced knowledge—but rather it was a feat achieved by the power of the sacrament. Passing the altar rail marked the transition from time into eternity. The altar, ultimately significant because of the Eucharist, was a space of eternal tabernacle—it was the place where Heaven reached down and was present on Earth. The rail used to be symbolic of this. The greater symbol, however, is that the faithful would receive the Eucharist while kneeling at this rail—the eternal breaches the divide and enters into us through the sacrament. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church observes,

> His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past…all that Christ is…participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all (CCC 1085).

This dichotomy of eternity and time—and the way in which it is broken down through receiving the Eucharist—makes plain the meaning of very first paragraph of the Catechism, that

> God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this,

> when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life (CCC 1).

That "at every time and in every place, God draws close to man" is the ultimate implication of the Eucharist and the Incarnation for literature: Christ is present, of all times and places, in the human heart, and that there is no human experience to which Christ is a stranger.

The Eucharist represents the possibility of being in union with One who has seen every adventure, known every hardship, heard every story, and lived the best fairy tale. Eucharistic adoration, in turn, is both a powerful source of inspiration and a sanction to write for any author willing to partake.

The Authority of the Priest

I have often said to my Protestant friends that if there is any curse to being Catholic, it is that we Catholics have heard most Bible verses—we are intimately familiar with much of the Bible—but we often cannot tell you where in the Bible the verse is from. It took me until I was about 15 to realize that St. Paul's great verse on the humility of Christ—"who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped"—was in his letter to the Philippians (Philippians 2:6). This was only because I took a summer and read the entire New Testament. However, it was already a verse which I had memorized through many years of Mass attendance.

What this goes to show, however, is that, venerable tomes and gold leaf aside, Catholicism is still at heart an oral tradition. For evidence of this, one only has to look towards the heart of Catholicism—the Mass and the sacraments. These elements—and liturgy in general for that matter—emphasize presence and hearing above the ability to reference what is said at a

later time. No sacrament can be received by proxy: confession cannot be received in writing or over the phone; a Catholic's obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days cannot be met by reading the Order of Mass or watching it on TV; reading along with the readings at Mass is entirely optional (although ADA friendly). As observed in the Catechism, "Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church" (CCC 1484). Ultimately, the reception of the sacraments is built upon the ability of the human person to hear and respond to a man's spoken word.

I say 'a man' specifically because this man is Christ. The priest in the sacrament is the instrument of Christ. At Mass, the priest stands *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ. As the Catechism states,

> Certain members are called by God, in and through the Church, to a special service of the community. These servants are chosen and consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the head, for the service of all the members of the Church. The ordained minister is, as it were, an "icon" of Christ the priest…The redemptive sacrifice of Christ is unique, accomplished once for all; yet it is made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Church. The same is true of the one priesthood of Christ; it is made present through the ministerial priesthood without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood: "Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers" (CCC 1142; 1545).

Thus the authority and power of God the creator—who spoke the world into existence and continues to sustain it through his own will—is vested in a human being's word. When the priest says "This is my body…this is my blood," bread and wine become Christ's body and blood.

The implications of this for the Catholic author are not only that the Catholic author believes that "God draws near to man"—the Eucharistic imagination—but that God chooses and empowers a human voice to do so: the world is sanctified, not with a bang, nor with a whisper, but sanctified how it began—with a word. The authority of the priest mirrors and surpasses the prelapserian power of human language:

> So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name (Genesis 2:19).

> [Jesus] said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained' (John 20:21-3).

In the words of J. R. R. Tolkien, "God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect…of their strange nature" ("On Fairy Stories" 88). Not only does Jesus, in entering the world, raise it from sin and darkness, but in choosing to use human language to do so, raises language from Babel and gives it power again. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Catholic Church—a universal, omni-lingual institution (in which Latin, as a dead language, was the ultimate symbol).

Now, this isn't to say that the Catholic author's text is a kind of sacrament, nor that authorship is a kind of priesthood. Rather, the Eucharistic Imagination and the Authority of the Priest serve as inspiration and sanction to make a story present to readers. The linguistic power

of the priest and the universal reality of the Eucharist are both inaccessible to the human author—we do not have the power to make a story real, nor make ourselves viscerally present in it. However, the analogous structure of the world as text and God as author is not lost on those who faithfully attend Mass—those who are witness to the seeds of the Kingdom of God made present to earth by the tongue of a priest.

What does this corresponding Catholic literary imagination look like?

In order to answer this question, I will be examining four Catholic authors: G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, Flannery O'Connor, and Gene Wolfe. All of these authors wrote within the last 100 years, and have garnered high praise in their fields. They are neither unknown, nor untalented, and they all engaged their craft with their faith in mind.

The first broad category, the British, is also the first, chronologically. Chesterton and Tolkien were by far the most influential, and had a definite influence on their later counterparts. Chesterton dabbled in many genres, mostly settling in mystery (if 'settled' could ever describe it). Tolkien almost exclusively dealt in fantasy.

The second broad category, the Americans, is more recent. O'Connor is better-known in academia than Wolfe, but Wolfe is still alive, so that may be subject to change. Both were influenced by Chesterton and Tolkien (among other influences). O'Connor wrote Southern Gothic—a genre focused on the misfit and the outcast. Wolfe writes almost exclusively in science fiction, although some of his short stories are not overtly so.

I chose these authors because they have a deft command of their craft in addition to being Catholic (or because of it), but also because they are diverse. I want to especially deliver the point that Catholic literary imagination is not monochromatic—it doesn't simply excel at one genre, story type, or plotline. Rather, it is applicable across genres and continents.

Part 1:

G. K. Chesterton – The Riddles of God

"Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—"
(*The Man Who Was Thursday* 176-77).

The late Christopher Hitchens—a preeminently respectable, if loudmouthed atheist praised by Bishop Robert Barron for his laser-like focus on truth—said in his essay "The Reactionary: the Charming, Sinister G. K. Chesterton," that "the verdict one must pass on GKC" is that "when he was charming, he was also deeply unserious and frivolous" and when he was serious, "he was really quite sinister" (Hitchens 82). Hitchens cites Chesterton's love of food and drink as part of the frivolity, of course, "with the pub revolution to set off the Distributist revolution" (Hitchens 82). Hitchens is at his most damning, however, when he critiques Chesterton's "failure to meet a distinct moral challenge" in failing to utterly reject the sentiments of Mussolini's fascism (which Chesterton admired), or to blame Nazism on the right philosophical culprits (Chesterton blamed it on Protestantism). This, Hitchens says, is Chesterton's sinister seriousness—that "at a time when civilization was in danger from the men of the Hitler-Vatican Concordat…when the hour really struck, Chesterton could not detect a paradox when it truly reared up to confront him and his prejudices" (Hitchens 82). Hitchens believes Chesterton to be too in-awe of authority, especially the authority of the Church, to properly critique it in its dangerous forms. In short, Chesterton at his most serious is also at his most culpable.

As an aside, Hitchens fails to understand Chesterton's nonfiction remarks—not only does Hitchens not understand the Hitler-Vatican Concordat, but also the context of Chesterton's attitude towards Judaism. But Chesterton's fiction especially escapes him. Fiction is noticeably a genre that the rather severe Hitchens had no experience writing, and it shows in his review—Chesterton's fiction merits only one gloss of a paragraph; Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday,* and his *Father Brown* series (which I will spend the most time on) merit only one sentence each. In short, Hitchens' most damning criticisms of Chesterton miss the point.

The nature of Chesterton's *contra mundum*—in the sense that he was, indeed, a reactionary—was not at its heart, serious. While Hitchens was correct in damning Chesterton's seriousness, I'm not entirely sure Chesterton would have opposed the damnation. The statement that seriousness brought out the worst in Chesterton, and perhaps was his worst aspect could be writ large. Seriousness brought out and continues to bring out the worst in Catholics. Our infamy for 'Catholic guilt,' for severe nuns, for strict schools, and for unnoticed abuse is well-earned. However, our more proper fame—Chesterton's more proper fame—lies to this day in beer, food, hymns, and ability to tell stories. While Chesterton may have been a corpulent man who felt gravity severely, the most important and Catholic thing about him—especially apparent in his fiction—strove against the gravity of the world like a leap: his levity.

The Aesthete of Elfland

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born to Marie and Edward Chesterton in 1874, and since the fairytales of childhood, always looked back, not with nostalgia, but at nostalgia. It was from fairytales and childhood that he derived his most memorable and potent philosophies and stories. Chesterton's Catholic literary imagination is derived from his childhood encounters with fairytales, not only in recognition of the "childlike faith" that Jesus prescribes, but in contrast with the dull and quixotic fantasy which is adults call 'real life' (Matthew 18:3).

Chesterton describes the principles he learned from fairytales in childhood in "The Ethics of Elfland," a chapter of his book *Orthodoxy*. While many of the lessons and principles of fairytales are relatively straightforward—

> There is the lesson of "Cinderella," which is the same as that of the Magnificat—EXALTAVIT HUMILES. There is the great lesson of "Beauty and the Beast;" that a thing must be loved BEFORE it is loveable. There is the terrible allegory of

> the "Sleeping Beauty," which tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep (*Orthodoxy* 55).

—Chesterton is concerned with a more elemental principle: fairytales make plain the miraculous in everyday life. Fairy tales are not concerned, Chesterton asserts, with imagining the inconceivable, but with connecting and transforming objects. "We have always in our fairy tales," he notes, "kept this sharp distinction between the science of mental relations, in which there really are laws, and the science of physical facts, in which there are no laws, but only weird repetitions" (*Orthodoxy* 56). In this, Chesterton approximates the philosophy of David Hume, namely, his 'Problem of Induction.' This problem states that, although science relies on the supposition that elements interacting in the same way under the same circumstances will produce the same result, this supposition is undermined by human inexperience—just because you've eaten apples all your life doesn't mean you can say that all apples are good to eat. Fairy tales call the transformation of harmless apples into poison apples 'magic.' Thus, says Chesterton,

> All the terms used in the science books, 'law,' 'necessity,' 'order,' 'tendency,' and so on, are really unintellectual, because they assume an inner synthesis, which we do not possess. The only words that ever satisfied me as describing Nature are the terms used in the fairy books, 'charm,' 'spell,' 'enchantment.' They express the arbitrariness of the fact and its mystery (*Orthodoxy* 58).

This philosophical principle never did Hume much good, perhaps because he spent his time telling it to scientists, and they just scoffed at him. Chesterton, however, had no interest in applying the Problem of Induction to science at all. Chesterton spent his time telling this problem to himself, and it led him to the Church. The difference in approach is that Chesterton allowed

this sense of magic to pervade his thought: "the world was a shock, but it was not merely shocking; existence was a surprise, but it was a pleasant surprise" (*Orthodoxy* 60). As such, this attitude led him to the second principle he associated with fairy tales: conditional joy.

> A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone… Such, it seemed, was the joy of man, either in elfland or on earth; the happiness depended on NOT DOING SOMETHING which you could at any moment do and which, very often, it was not obvious why you should not do (*Orthodoxy* 62).

For Chesterton, it was (is) important to note that the arbitrary command of God in Eden—"You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die"—is just as arbitrary as Eden itself (Genesis 2:16-17). "If the miller's third son said to the fairy, 'Explain why I must not stand on my head in the fairy palace,' the other might fairly reply, 'Well, if it comes to that, explain the fairy palace'" (*Orthodoxy* 62). For Chesterton, the earth is just as inexplicable as a fairy palace—the inexplicable, unpredictable fact of its existence makes every explicable, predictable thing wonderful: "It is not a necessity, for though we can count on it happening practically, we have no right to say that it must always happen… We do not count on it; we bet on it" (*Orthodoxy* 57-58).

It is this train of thought that allows Chesterton to arrive at one of his more famous quotes:

> A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free,

> therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again;" and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

It is important to note that Chesterton is, at this time, not yet Catholic. *Orthodoxy* was published in 1908, while Chesterton was received into the Church in 1922. However, the wonder with which Chesterton is drawn towards the seemingly monotonous, everyday aspects of creation is already palpable. In short, though still Anglican, the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist—a more fundamental mundane miracle than daisies and sunrises—was already inspiring him.

While the chapter title styles Chesterton as an ethicist of Elfland—he goes on to talk about obedience and goodness saved from the wreck—in terms of the impact of fairy tales on his fiction, Chesterton is more of an aesthete of Elfland. Ultimately, these principles—that the universe "does not explain itself," that if its moral rules seem arbitrary, so is its existence, and consequently that our existence, even (perhaps especially) our monotonous existence, can be treated with wonder—affected Chesterton's fiction in a more powerful way than simply ethics. Chesterton excelled at mystery—a genre uniquely suited to finding the miraculous (it seems obvious to say the mysterious) at the heart of the everyday. Far from being simply didactic, Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* and his *Father Brown* series raise mystery to an art.

I said above that when Chesterton was serious—most often, when he wrote nonfiction—he was at his worst. You may be wondering, then, why the last four pages were on a piece of Chesterton's nonfiction instead of his fiction, which I had just finished praising. The answer is simple. G. K. Chesterton belonged, as a writer, to a specific time period—a period that talked, as all periods talk, in code. In a critical New Yorker article titled "The Back of the World," Adam Gopnik observed that Chesterton "seemed very dated very soon" (Gopnik). Just after the First World War, a tectonic shift in language occurred.

> A new form of aerodynamic prose came into being…Chestertonian mannerisms…appeared to have come from some other universe. Writers like Shaw and Chesterton depended on a kind of comic and complicit hyperbole: every statement is an overstatement, and understood as such by readers. The new style prized understatement, to be filled in by the reader (Gopnik).

As such, Chesterton didn't really believe that all science was magic masquerading as fate, as is quoted above. Although he once remarked that "when we are asked why eggs turn to birds or fruits fall in autumn, we must answer…that it is MAGIC," modern credulity lends the statement more weight than Chesterton's contemporary style probably might have—it was understood that Chesterton's point was that the world ought to be viewed as a creation of God, and not that the actual natural processes of the earth are akin to the machinations of a fairy godmother (though we might say so for 'Mother Nature') (*Orthodoxy* 57). When inevitably writing style shifted away from this, Gopnik observes pointedly that writers like Chesterton "had hit them, and went on roaring anyway" (Gopnik). This is perhaps what makes Hitchens damn Chesterton with such severity.

However, the shift did not apply with such rigor to fiction as it did to nonfiction. While Chestertonian mannerisms like "beginning sentences with 'I wish to conclude' or 'I should say, therefore' or 'Moreover,' using the first person plural un-self-consciously ('What we have to ask ourselves…')" and other archaic-sounding phrases are harsh to our ears in nonfiction, "making sure that every sentence was crafted like a sword and loaded like a cannon," is actually a virtue in fiction (Gopnik). Thus the previous four pages of this document consisted of Chesterton thundering his philosophy in overstatement and hyperbole (you may not believe it, but the passages I cited were the tame ones), while, in the next pages, I will have the privilege of citing this same philosophy in the potent subtlety of his *Father Brown* series.

The final implication of Chesterton's passage in *Orthodoxy* concerning the monotony of daisies is this: that if God is strong enough to exult in monotony and if His laws encourage this same vivacity, then it is sin, and not orthodoxy, that is boring and predictable—"heavy, humdrum, and safe" (*Orthodoxy* 107). This implication is the heart of Father Brown as a character, and *Father Brown* as a series.

Chesterton makes in preeminently clear that, unlike Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown—a priest and sometimes-detective—does not operate on deduction or outward forms of human reason. It is not through study that the unassuming priest comes to know so much about crime. Rather, it is the priest's sacramental insight into the human heart that makes him such an effective detective. In Chesterton's very first story of the series, "The Blue Cross," the master thief Flambeau—caught in the act by the priest—asks Father Brown,

"How in blazes do you know all these horrors?" cried Flambeau.

The shadow of a smile crossed the round, simple face of his clerical opponent.

> "Oh, by being a celibate simpleton, I suppose," he said. "Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?" (*The Innocence of Father Brown* 24).

Father Brown solves crimes by understanding the criminal—by being psychological. However, as Lawrence Clipper observes in his essay "Detectives and Apocalypses," "Chesterton and his hero are not disciples of Freud…His psychology is Aristotelian, or Catholic, resting on the assumption that human psychology is very often 'simpler than you understand'" (Clipper; *The Incredulity of Father Brown* 498-99).

Apart from being "wholly unaware of human evil," Chesterton's priest often proves more expert on the subject than even the hardened criminal. In the aforementioned "The Blue Cross," Father Brown not only catches Flambeau, but after catching him, remarks on the ways in which Flambeau could have escaped the priest's grasp:

> "I rather wonder you didn't stop it with the Donkey's Whistle."
>
> "With the what?" asked Flambeau.
>
> "I'm glad you've never heard of it," said the priest, making a face. "It's a foul thing. I'm sure you're too good a man for a Whistler. I couldn't have countered it even with the Spots myself; I'm not strong enough in the legs."
>
> "What on earth are you talking about?" asked the other.
>
> "Well, I did think you'd know the Spots," said Father Brown, agreeably surprised.
>
> "Oh, you can't have gone so very wrong yet!" (24).

The priest's agreeable surprise at Flambeau's yet-retained innocence is a recurring exclamation / consolation that Father Brown offers to most of the criminals he encounters. The charm of these stories (by far Chesterton's most popular work) lies not only in, as Clipper notes, "the paradox of

an outwardly innocent appearance (his hero's "blank expression like an idiot's" also recalls Mr. Pickwick) and his deep understanding of sin and evil," but in the hope which the priest brings to those who too-quickly consider themselves lost (Clipper). As Joshua Hren's article on the "The Sign of the Broken Sword," titled "Truth and Lies in the Chestertonian Sense" observes,

> Chesterton's tale teaches us that to obtain fullness, prudence requires more than a knowledge of virtue. After all, as Patrick Dineen writes…'all are equally deprived of a certain knowledge of virtue.' But, as Fr. Brown's character suggests, all are not equally deprived of a certain knowledge of depravity (Hren).

If a quaint and celibate priest can understand your sins, your sins are not too great to be forgiven.

The predictable structure of the series, while admittedly dull as stories, is ponderous with this philosophy below face value. As Clipper observes:

> The recurrent formula soon becomes wearisome: a number of suspects are paraded before the reader, clues are given or withheld, and Father Brown after some discussion announces that he knows—and has always known—the identity of the criminal. The particular psychological insight or theological maxim is then displayed for the reader's edification, and the story ends (Clipper).

However, as with the greater part of the genre, the mystery at the heart of the Father Brown stories is not the crime—not solving the morbid puzzle. The mystery, as stated above, is the paradox of the priest. Father Brown isn't fascinating because he is a detective; he is fascinating because his detective work seems so in line with his priesthood. Sin is predictable, just as the plot structure of a detective story is (probably because detective stories are about sin—this was the genius connection Chesterton made). Father Brown is the unpredictable one; you never know what pearls of wisdom he might drop next.

This is a powerful exposition of a sacramental imagination: not only is Father Brown's understanding of the human heart obtained through the sacrament of reconciliation, but as a character, he makes himself radically available to both the sinners in the story and the sinners that read the story. The innocence of Father Brown "rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" ("On Fairy Stories" 87).

The Paradoxes of Sunday

Despite Chesterton's success with the *Father Brown* series—a series so widely published and influential that a production of a film based on "The Blue Cross" starring Sir Alec Guinness directly led to the actor's conversion to Catholicism—Chesterton's most philosophically and theologically interesting mystery had very little to do with *Father Brown* materially or stylistically.

The Man who was Thursday: A Nightmare is a genre-stretching tale concerning the exploits of an undercover policeman in ~1920s England named Gabriel Syme. Syme—an itinerant philosopher—is recruited to a secret arm of Scotland Yard: a philosophical police force concerned with intellectual crime. Syme is tasked with infiltrating the High Council of Anarchists—a group of seven members each named after a day of the week. Tricking a low level anarchist named Gregory into letting him into a local chapter, Syme is successfully elected Thursday.

Through a remarkable series of events, Syme slowly discovers that every single member of the High Council—except for the gargantuan and enigmatic President, Sunday—is just a member of the secret police in a grotesque disguise. Teaming up, the six 'days' pursue Sunday through London in an increasingly surreal chase. Sunday eventually leads the 'days' to a rural estate where they are all warmly received—they are fed, washed, and dressed in flowing robes,

each befitting his day in the creation narrative. In a grand garden in which all of nature seems to be present, the 'days' present their complaints before the President—who is now recognized as the Chief of the Secret Police (heretofore simply a man in a dark room) who recruited them all in the first place. The secretary of the High Council pleads, "If you were the man in the dark room, why were you also Sunday, an offense to the sunlight? If you were from the first our father and our friend, why were you also our greatest enemy?" Wednesday observes "It seems so silly that you should have been on both sides and fought yourself;" Tuesday simply says "I wish I knew why I was hurt so much" (*The Man Who Was Thursday* 188). Gregory, the anarchist from the beginning of the book, also makes an appearance:

> 'You!' he cried. 'You never hated because you never lived. I know what you are all of you, from first to last—you are the people in power! You are the police—the great fat, smiling men in blue and buttons! You are the Law, and you have never been broken. But is there a free soul alive that does not long to break you, only because you have never been broken? We in revolt talk all kind of nonsense doubtless about this crime or that crime of the Government. It is all folly! The only crime of the Government is that it governs…I could forgive you everything, you that rule all mankind, if I could feel for once that you had suffered for one hour a real agony such as I—'…He had turned his eyes so as to see suddenly the great face of Sunday, which wore a strange smile.
>
> 'Have you,' he cried in a dreadful voice, 'have you ever suffered?' (*Thursday* 190-91).

In response to His accuser's question, Sunday's face grows larger and larger until it blots out the sun, and Syme "seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, 'Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?'" (*Thursday* 191; Mark 10:38).

Syme swoons before the Face of Sunday, only to slowly and naturally come to—he is walking along a country lane, talking with Gregory, "but Syme could only feel an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did. He felt he was in possession of some impossible good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality" (*Thursday* 191).

While at the beginning of the book, the philosophical tension seems to be between policeman and anarchist—which is better, and does a policeman secretly want to be an anarchist?—this ending reveals that this tension is only the starting point. As Slavoj Zizek says, in an essay titled "From Job to Christ: A Paulinian Reading of Chesterton,"

> At the novel's end, the message is precisely the identity of crime and law…therein resides the final twist of *Thursday*, in which "Sunday," the arch-criminal, anarchist's all-powerful leader, is revealed as the mysterious chief of the super-secret police unit who mobilizes Syme into the fight against the anarchists (i.e. HIMSELF) (Zizek 80).

In other words, which is Sunday's true face, the President of the High Council of Anarchists, or the Chief of Secret Police? Chesterton's answer is neither (and my use of pronouns for Sunday may have already hinted at it). Sunday's last words come directly from Christ—it is God who is the ultimate policeman and the ultimate anarchist.

Read in this light, *Thursday* becomes a mediation not only on the ever popular problem of evil—"I wish I knew why I was hurt so much"—but also on the philosophical implications of

the chief paradox of Christianity: the Crucifixion and Death of God. Zizek observes that Syme provides the formula when he replies to Gregory's final accusation:

> Why does a dandelion have to fight the whole universe? For the same reason that I had to be alone in the dreadful Council of the Days. So that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist (*Thursday* 190).

If "Law is the greatest transgression, the defender of the Law the greatest rebel," Zizek ponders, "Does it hold also for God Himself?" (Zizek 81). Sunday's reply—indeed, the reply of God—indicates the final revelation: "that God suffers even more than we mortals" (Zizek 81). As Chesterton put it in *Orthodoxy*, "Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king" (*Orthodoxy* 145). The problem of pain isn't answered by Christianity in the sense that Christianity explains pain away. Rather, Christianity is the only religion that believes God came to earth to empty Himself out in agony:

> When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God (*Orthodoxy* 145).

As a reply to the cause of anarchy: that "the only true crime of the government is that it governs," Chesterton proffers God the judge and Father, God the sufferer and Son, and God the comforter and Holy Spirit—none above the others, but a mystery more satisfying than a solution.

The Riddles of God

The most famous quote from *Thursday*—"we've only known the back of the world"—which I have chosen for this section's epigraph, preeminently emphasizes Chesterton's ultimate focus on mystery. Throughout his writing, from *Father Brown* to *The Man Who Was Thursday,*

from *The Ballad of the White Horse* to *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton is convinced that "the riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man" ("Introduction to the Book of Job").

Although I have barely scratched the surface on Chesterton's bibliography, it is clear that the man's strong affinity for 'the riddles of God' was rooted in his affinity for the Catholic faith. Although much of the above-cited writing was written before his being accepted into the church, his conversion was obviously a process long in the making. Chesterton's literary imagination seemed to be Catholic long before he was.

His emphasis on 'mystery more satisfying than answers' and of 'goodness saved from the wreck' especially resonated through the Catholic literary imagination, and became a primary foundation for the next generation of Catholic authors.

Part 2:

J. R. R. Tolkien – The Joy of Creation

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

“God’s Grandeur,” Gerard Manley Hopkins

That John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a Catholic author—that he was a practicing Catholic who made an effort to assess his works by his relationship to his Faith—is an old notion to Tolkien scholars. However, on the premise that not everyone is a Tolkien scholar, there are several points which mark Tolkien's main body of work (stories from the realm of Middle Earth: *The Silmarillion, The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*) as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letters 191).

The Allegories of Middle Earth

The first example of this is the most fundamental: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and indeed *The Hobbit,* has a happy ending. Ordinarily, I would not say that a happy ending is endemic of Catholicism—The Last Things taught in the Catholic Church are Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell, and only one of these things is explicitly happy (and it's not guaranteed). Tolkien has much to say on the subject, however—he is talking, as Chesterton did, on the subject of Fairy Stories. In an essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien coins the term *eucatastrophe* as a description for a happy ending that is, as Chesterton put it, saved from the wreck by

> a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief ("On Fairy Stories" 86).

This consolation Tolkien identifies with the consolation of the Gospel (hinted at by his use of "evangelium"): "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy" ("Fairy" 88-

89). In this, Fairy Stories are good because they echo the joy of the Gospel, "In such stories…we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that…rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" ("Fairy" 87).

Other clear references to Catholicism come in the form of strong Catholic imagery. Galadriel is a clear Marian archetype, for she is exceedingly fair, and "above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth," and there is "in her…no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 371; 373). Furthermore, she extends gifts to the Fellowship upon their exit of Lorien. Her gift and words to Frodo, a phial of light, with the prayer "may it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out," is strongly reminiscent of Our Lady handing St. Simon Stock the Brown Scapular: "Take this Scapular. Whosoever dies wearing it shall not suffer eternal fire. It shall be a sign of salvation, a protection in danger and pledge of peace" (*The Fellowship of the ring* 393). Galadriel's words are also a better description than many for the Rosary.

Furthermore, there is a trio of Christ figures—Christ the King, Christ the Prophet, and Christ the Priest. Aragorn—Isildur's heir in the same sense as Jesus is the son of David—ascends the throne as King, "and in that moment all the trumpets were blown" (*The Return of the King* 246). As it is said in the Psalm, "God has gone up with a shout; the LORD, amid trumpet blasts." (Psalm 47:6). Gandalf is a "servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Anor," who casts down a demonic flame into the abyss, later killing it (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 344). Elijah was a prophet who challenged the priests of Baal to a contest of fire in which "The LORD'S fire came down and consumed the holocaust, wood, stones, and dust, and it lapped up the water in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38). Furthermore, while Gandalf is killed and is sent back as Gandalf the White, so, too Elijah "went up to heaven in a whirlwind," but is to return "before the great and

terrible day of Jehovah come" (2 Kings 2:11; Malachi 4:5). Jesus later confirms that John the Baptist "is Elijah, the one who is to come" (Matthew 11:14). Similarly, Samwise Gamgee climbs Mount Doom, Frodo, too weak to make the climb, on his back. Sam does so because he saw Frodo sleeping and "wept in his heart" (*The Return of the King* 218). Jesus, while contemplating the day to come in the Garden of Gethsemane, "was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. When he rose from prayer and returned to his disciples, he found them sleeping from grief" (Luke 22:44-45). Then Jesus, "carrying the cross himself…went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha" (John 19:17). In Tolkien's narrative, it is clear that Aragorn is a type for Christ the King, Gandalf for Christ the Prophet, and Samwise for Christ the Priest.

It is also clear that, while Iluvatar, The One, is analogous to God the Father, and several characters for God the Son, Tolkien also employs several agents for God the Holy Spirit. In an essay titled "A Wind from the West: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Tolkien's Middle Earth," George Hartley describes the Great Eagles as performing this function.

> The eagle functions in the manner by which C. S. Lewis describes the Holy Spirit: 'It will be there when you can't feel it. May even be operative when you can feel it least.' Even the language of Thorondor s coming against Morgoth 'like the noise of winds of Manwë' sounds very much like the Holy Spirit coming 'as of a rushing mighty wind' on the Day of Pentecost (Hartley 114; *The Letters of C. S. Lewis* 401; *The Silmarillion* 154; Acts 2:2).

The eagles "may be viewed as an incarnation of eucatastrophe," a *deus ex machina* to be sure, but only in the sense that Elijah's chariots of fire are a *deus ex machina* (Hartley 115). As such, Tolkien's work is rife with latent theological, Christological, and Marian allegory.

It is worth noting, however, that none of the allegories are pure allegory, and many may not be intentional. Unlike Lewis' Aslan, no figure is simply a Christ figure, no figure simply Mary. Galadriel has her own history that sets her apart from Mary. Gandalf was also inspired by Odin. Aragorn was never lauded as God. Rather, Tolkien's work breaks through allegory into something more.

Let there be Light

Although it is tempting, and in one light appropriate, to assign such allegory to Tolkien's work—the ground is fertile for further ecological, feminist, theological, sociological, and political analogies in *The Lord of the Rings*—Tolkien's most basic and inspired piece of latent theology falls entirely in step with his stated abhorrence of allegory ("I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory") (*Letters* 168). Tolkien's decades-long project—the history of middle earth—need not be compared or attributed to any historical or religious event in the real world ("primary world") except Tolkien himself. Tolkien's Catholic literary imagination was first and most essentially expressed in his conception of authorship: Tolkien measured the success of his storytelling not by whether or not a certain message was understood by the reader, but if the reader believed in the author's creation. In successful fiction,

> the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator." He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside ("Fairy" 60).

Fiction, for Tolkien, is marked not by whether it is realistic—not whether or not it can happen in the Primary world—but whether or not it has an "inner consistency of reality" in it ("Fairy" 88).

This is the most fundamentally Catholic part of Tolkien's literary imagination. Contrary to Tom Shippey's assertion that "the identity of man and nature, of namer and named was probably [Tolkien's] strongest belief, stronger even than his Catholicism," it is precisely Tolkien's Catholicism which inspired this philosophy (Shippey 131-32). Tolkien associates the creative power of man with the creative power of God in Genesis:

> Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night'…So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name (Genesis 1:3-5; 2:19).

The ability to speak, make, and name is thus the legacy of being made *in imago dei*. In a reply to C. S. Lewis, who early in his career accused myths of being lies (though breathed "through silver"), Tolkien asserts in verse that

> Dear Sir, I said—Although now long estranged,
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
> Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
> and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
> through whom is splintered from a single White
> to many hues, and endlessly combined

in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made (“Fairy” 74).

Tolkien’s use of the phrase “sub-creator” is telling of this belief, for it implies a primary Creator, but also his belief in the evangelical power of language—certainly some of his “living shapes that move from mind to mind” are stories of the Gospel. As Ralph C. Wood observes in a review titled “Following the Many Roads of Recent Tolkien Scholarship,”

> For Tolkien, we are made in the image of God primarily because we are speaking creatures…Tongue and mind are co-eval, Tolkien liked to say: language and thought come into being at the same time. As products of the Logos, we are creatures of logoi. The Word gives us life through words. Unlike those post-moderns who regard language as an arbitrary system of signs, a mechanism of mere labels that masters us far more than we master it, Tolkien believed that language has ontological status. It is rooted in Reality. Things are what we fittingly name them. A rose called a mugwort would not indeed smell so sweet. (“Roads” 588-89).

This fundamentally Catholic belief—that fiction is a sub-creation created (effectively or ineffectively) by a human being partaking in the creative power of God—reveals and explains

Tolkien's attitudes towards fiction: that his primary reason for writing isn't allegory or didacticism, but the joy of creation.

The Joy of Creation

In the light of this paradigm on the spoken word, Tolkien's deeply philosophical—although sometimes simply spiteful—influences and sources of inspiration start to make more sense.

For instance, Tolkien's invention of the Ents was, as he says, unplanned. In a footnote to one of his letters, he admits of the Ents that

> Their pan in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war (*Letters* 228).

Not only is it funny to imagine Tolkien nursing a cold disappointment about *Macbeth* from boyhood into his writing career, but this kind of inspiration is precisely what Tolkien is talking about in "On Fairy Stories." Young Tolkien watching *Macbeth* was already willing to believe in witches, and at sad fulfilment of their prophesy, "the moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed" ("Fairy" 60). And so Tolkien, inspired, wrote a better fulfillment: the Last March of the Ents.

The failure of Shakespeare to deliver on his magic is also the inspiration for another of Tolkien's fulfilled prophesies. When the witches tell Macbeth that no man born of woman will kill him, Tolkien (and probably Macbeth) was disappointed when Macbeth was killed by a man not born, but "untimely ripped" from the womb—a cop out. In response, Tolkien wrote this passage from The Battle of the Pelennor Fields:

> A sword rang as it was drawn. 'Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.'
>
> 'Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!'
>
> Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. 'But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Eowyn I am, Eomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him' (*Return* 116).

Tolkien wrote what he saw Shakespeare was blind to: the obvious way to kill a man of whom it is said 'no man can kill' is to have a woman kill him.

For another example of inspiration, we can examine a text which was extremely influential on Tolkien's thought: "The Battle of Maldon." The unknown poet recounts a battle between Viking raiders and English defenders which takes place on a river. The river is only crossable via a natural causeway that is too narrow for the Vikings to get an army across. "Birhtnoth, the earl of Essex, who was leader of the English militia, took up his position at the end of the causeway and from there was able to prevent the enemy from crossing to the mainland" ("The Battle of Maldon" 1). However, the Viking leader made an appeal to Birhtnoth's sense of chivalry—he asked that his army be let across the causeway so that they could have a fair fight—and Birhtnoth granted his request…and the Vikings slaughtered the English due to their greater numbers. The poet attributes this defeat to Birhtnoth's "overmastering pride," which, in the original Anglo-Saxon, is *ofermod*. In an essay titled "Ofermod," Tolkien observes that, as in Wiglaf's lament for Beowulf, the Battle of Maldon is another instance in which "by one man's will many must woe endure" (*Beowulf* 3077-78; "Ofermod" 27). Tolkien sees this—the acceptability within chivalry of letting others die for

you—as the fatal weakness of chivalry. Inspired by the failure of one leader, who stood aside and let an enemy cross over and kill his friends, Tolkien writes the opposite into *The Lord of the Rings*—the success and sacrifice of Gandalf, whose brave battle-cry is "you cannot pass" (*Fellowship* 345).

This series of inspirations and reinterpretations that Tolkien incorporated into his work serve to remind the reader of exactly how Tolkien wanted his work to be viewed. I have already observed that he hated allegory—I have not explained. In his letters, Tolkien explains that

> one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story;' and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends. You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen that would happen, if such a thing existed (*Letters* 140).

In short, the allegories and analogies in a well-written story will exist in the relationship between the reader and the story (and inevitably the author and the story), but, if it is indeed a well-written story, the allegories will not be essential to it—it can "be read as 'just a story.'"

This is tied to the authorial (and Divine) joy of creation in that writing a story with no essential allegories is a purely creative activity. The most flat and lifeless platitude in response to suffering is that 'God has a plan,' or 'there's always a reason.' The fact that these platitudes are

true only makes them more flat and lifeless. Like asserting that Gandalf is just a middle earth version of Elijah, reducing Creation to a lesson-to-be-learned doesn't give enough credit to the Creative Imagination of God. While inspired in part by the failures of other authors, I cannot help but conclude that Tolkien was inspired most of all by the thought that he was a secondary creator participating in the power of the primary Creator—that by writing he could tap the joy of God.

Part 3:

Flannery O'Connor – The Violence of Grace

God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

The jump from Chesterton and Tolkien to Flannery O'Connor is initially an abrupt and jarring change in both style and content of fiction. Chesterton and Tolkien were English fantasy writers who, according to Allison Milbank, utilize the genre of fantasy in order to "introduce a sense of the holy in an increasingly disenchanted and secularized society" (Milbank 8). In the face of post-enlightenment nihilism, Chesterton and Tolkien turn to fantasy as a means of "extricating themselves from the inherent limitations [of such a philosophy]," observes Kayla Snow, in her essay "What Hath Hobbits to Do with Prophets? The Fantastic Reality of J. R. R. Tolkien and Flannery O'Connor" (Snow 117). This is evident in Chesterton's fixation on mystery and Catholicism as an answer to despair—especially in *The Ballad of the White Horse,* which I did not have time to go over. It is evident as well in Tolkien's personal history: his work on Middle Earth began as recourse to fantasy from the horrors of the First World War—on accusations of fantasy as escapist, Tolkien observed that fantasy was more akin to prisoner's escape than a soldier's desertion.

As the title of her essay indicates, Snow believes that "a similar parallelism exists between the literary and aesthetic works of Tolkien and O'Connor" (Snow 117). Chesterton, Tolkien, and O'Connor share a Thomistic philosophy: an anti-dualist philosophy which denies the two extremes of modern mind, which "generally conceives of reality (and truth) in two extremes: in a disembodied idealist sense or in a purely scientific, materialistic sense" (Snow 113). In an essay titled "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor," Peter Candler Jr. notes that

> Above all, O'Connor saw the modern condition as basically Manichean, a world of dualistic oppositions between nature and grace, form and content, story and

> meaning, body and soul. Fiction no less than theology is 'infected' with this heresy. (Candler 13; *Mystery* 68).

In short, modern readers either fetishize the divine over the human, or the human over the divine. Thomistic philosophy not only opposes this, but posits that the two are inseparable—the soul animates the body, the body reveals the soul; God is present to us in Christ. Ralph Wood describes this as a "profound conviction that the realms of nature and grace are almost seamlessly joined," in his essay "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros" ("Eros" 36). Chesterton uses the genre of mystery to make this clear: spiritual sins make physical crimes. Tolkien focuses on the incarnational aspect of language: we can communicate ourselves, our spirit, through words.

O'Connor's approach, however, is initially mystifying to the uninitiated reader. Her novels and short stories are full of eclectic, deeply disturbed, and violent characters. Unlike Chesterton and Tolkien's work, there doesn't seem to be a clear protagonist—in the sense that a protagonist is a good person—for the reader to identify with and take inspiration from. Her stories aren't about heroes—many of her main characters simply do not achieve any good—and they aren't about antiheroes, either—antiheroes are lovable for being flawed, and O'Connor's main characters are just flawed. To the uninitiated reader, many of her stories occur like train wrecks—you just can't quite take your eyes away.

This unfaltering gaze, however, is the first clue to understanding O'Connor's work in the light of Sacramental thought: it is the loving (sometimes unsympathetic) gaze of Christ. O'Connor writes the grotesque: an unwavering look at the human soul. Anagogy—the fourth and final of the senses of scripture—is the sense which "sees all things as instances of participation in God" (Candler 12). Thus, in O'Connor's estimation, "the poet is traditionally a blind man. But

the Christian poet, and the story-teller as well, is like the blind man Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees—but walking" ("Stories and Occasional Prose" 864). O'Connor's stories only begin to make sense as Anagogical visions of creation: sketches of interplay between resistant humans and the Love of God.

Whom do you Seek?

The first and primary indication of O'Connor's anagogical vision is her selection of characters. O'Connor remarks in her speech at Georgetown, "The Catholic Novelist in the South," that

> The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. His interests and sympathies may very well go, as mine do, directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill. The Catholic novelist in the South will see many distorted images of Christ, but he will certainly feel that a distorted image is better than no image at all. I think he will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development ("Stories" 859).

Accordingly, O'Connor's main character in "The Violent Bear it Away" is Francis Marion Tarwater, a sullen young man who is raised by his great-uncle to be a prophet and to baptize the mentally handicapped son of his atheist uncle. O'Connor's other novel,"Wise Blood," features a similar main character: Hazel Motes. Motes is "the self-appointed founding prophet of the

‘Church Without Christ,’ whose only pulpit is the top of a forty-dollar Essex sedan, whose gospel is that the only truth is that there is no truth” (Candler 21). Both characters fit O’Connor’s bill as “backwater prophets and shouting fundamentalists.”

The importance of these characters doesn’t lie, as I said above, in whether or not they are good, but in the relationship that they have with their vocation. It is by no accident that both main characters are called into their service as prophets. Tarwater has his task as prophet placed upon him by his great uncle, Old Tarwater: referring to young Tarwater’s mentally handicapped cousin and schoolteacher atheist uncle,

> the old man would say, beginning to brood on the schoolteacher’s child again, ‘that one—the Lord gave him one he couldn’t corrupt.’ And then he would grip the boy’s shoulder and put a fierce pressure on it. ‘And if I don’t get him baptized, it’ll be for you to do,’ he said. ‘I enjoin you to do it, boy’ (“The Violent Bear it Away” 379).

Tarwater, however, has a complicated relationship to this task: he bucks his vocation at every chance that he gets. John Byars, in an essay titled “Prophecy and Apocalyptic in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor,” observes that “[O’Connor] makes the struggle against their vocations as prophets the major action that envelops the protagonists of her two novels” (Byars). Tarwater consciously goes out of his way to deny his great uncle’s command—the very first act of rebellion being to not give his great uncle a proper burial when he dies. However, the vocation that Tarwater is called to—baptizing his cousin—remains almost an instinct for him. Despite constantly denying his Faith and vocation and eventually drowning his cousin because he hates him so much, Tarwater is unable to entirely let the call go. Just after drowning the child, Tarwater confesses to a truck driver he’s hitching a ride from:

the sentence rushed out of him and was gone. “I baptized him.”

“Huh?” the man said.

“It was an accident. I didn’t mean to,” he said breathlessly. Then, in a calmer voice he said, “The words just come out of themselves but it don’t mean nothing. You can’t be born again…They were just some words that run out of my mouth and spilled in the water” (“Violent” 458).

The semi-involuntary action is confessed like some sort of sin— as if it was a lapse in sanity in an otherwise sane situation. O’Connor’s inversion of sanity seems characteristic of her belief that the South, like Tarwater, “is hardly Christ-centered,” but most certainly “Christ-haunted” (“Stories” 861). The grace of God occurs to Tarwater like violence—it has to break in.

A similar resistance to the eruption of grace is particularly evident in Enoch Emery, a young man with ‘wise blood’ in the novel by the same name. Feeling, in his blood, the urge to attend a certain picture show as he walked by the theater, Emery says to himself,

I ain’t going in no picture show like that, he said, giving it a nervous look. I’m going home. I ain’t going to wait around in no picture show. I ain’t got the money to buy a ticket, he said, taking out his purse again. I ain’t even going to count thisyer change.

It ain’t but forty-three cent here, he said, that ain’t enough. A sign said the price of a ticket for adults was forty-five cents, balcony, thirty-five. I ain’t going to sit in no balcony, he said, buying a thirty-five cent ticket.

I ain’t going in, he said…in a few minutes he was up in a high part of the maw, feeling around, like Jonah, for a seat (“Wise Blood” 78-79).

O’Connor’s selection of Jonah and the whale isn’t random, but tied to her characterization of Enoch, Hazel, and Tarwater as prophets—prophets who must react in one way or another to a call, an eruption of grace.

Violence and Eros

Like Chesterton’s mysterious Sunday, O’Connor’s eruptions of actual grace (not to be confused with sanctifying grace) are enigmatic:

> Both Rayber [the schoolteacher] and Tarwater make free responses to the divine grace that erupts within their lives and their world… Even so, Rayber and Tarwater do not seem to be responding to anything akin to love…Tarwater…is reluctantly affirming a baptism that he intended as a love-denying murder. Where is either human agape or divine eros to be found in such acts? (“Eros” 50-51).

Like Sunday again, the revelation is the depth of divine love surpassing human understanding: “The divine eros exercises its true tenderness in pursuing us by way of kenosis, as God empties himself fully into our own humanity” (“Eros” 51). O’Connor, after all,

> wasn't interested in showing us what the religious life looks like; that would be getting ahead of ourselves in a world so radically broken that the truly religious are as rare as hen's teeth. Instead, O'Connor shows us over and over the radical experience of conversion (Morgan).

> Sweet images for God are almost always torn down by O’Connor…O’Connor shows us other sides to the divine-human relationship. The Christian becomes material in the hands of the sculptor, who will lop off and chip away as he sees fit.

> This is one reason for the strong reactions for and against O'Connor's storytelling. We are not supposed to like what she shows us (Sweeny 30).

Unlike Chesterton's Sunday, this revelation of divine love is one which is much more violent and erotic than a chase through London.

O'Connor's approach to divine love paints humans as recalcitrant, stubborn people who would only know divine love if it gored us in the gut. "The most powerful instance of erotic eruption occurs in 'Greenleaf,'" observes Wood, "There the divine eros--not unlike the disguised Zeus pursuing the maiden Europa, but now in the form of Mr. Greenleaf's scrub bull--stalks Mrs. May throughout the story" ("Eros" 48). The bull finally gores Mrs. May,

> the bull ... buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover.... One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her other side and held her in an unbreakable grip.... [S]he seemed ... to be bent over whispering some final discovery in the animal's ear ("Everything that Rises Must Converge" 523-24).

For Mrs. May, like the grandmother from "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," and Hazel Motes in "Wise Blood," the revelation only comes with death—death rushing with "THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" ("Violent" 478). For Tarwater, his newfound calling as a prophet is to inform the Children of God of this terrible speed—that the process of redemption is filled with the violent Eros of God, that mercy and love will burn your eyes clean.

Mercy More Frightening than Death

It is clear that O'Connor's source of inspiration, like Chesterton, is to carefully invert the common understanding in order to see if it makes more sense. The idea that conversion might be

an unpleasant or violent process is certainly not a common one. However, O'Connor's anagogical vision, in which everything is seen in the light of its participation in the divine, indicates a deeper revelation: that the violence and erotic desire of God for humanity is part of the human condition—more apparent in certain people, sure, but as much the vocation of Tarwater as it is of Raber, the vocation of the prophet as the schoolteacher.

As an American, I think that O'Connor has a greater appreciation for this than Chesterton or Tolkien. Both Chesterton and Tolkien understand that the purgative aspects of their stories are necessary—Syme and the Council of Days must live in fear of Sunday, if only for a short time, before they can mount his throne; Frodo and Sam must climb Mount Doom if there is ever going to be peace. However, O'Connor focuses on the purgative aspects of her stories to an extent that does not guarantee a happy ending. Mrs. May *seemed* to be whispering a new discovery, the grandmother from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" makes one last plea before death, etc. O'Connor almost never gives her readers the satisfaction of knowing her characters are saved—perhaps only Tarwater stands out in this regard.

For O'Connor, it seems like it almost doesn't matter what happens after the point of conversion—whether or not the dead will enter Heaven rests simply on the Mercy of God.

Part 4:

Gene Wolfe – The Everlasting Man

I was a highwayman
Along the coach roads I did ride
With sword and pistol by my side
Many a young maid lost her baubles to my trade
Many a soldier shed his lifeblood on my blade
The bastards hung me in the spring of twenty-five
But I am still alive

I was a sailor
I was born upon the tide
And with the sea I did abide
I sailed a schooner round the Horn to Mexico
I went aloft and furled the mainsail in a blow
And when the yards broke off they said that I got killed
But I am living still

I was a dam builder
Across the river deep and wide
Where steel and water did collide
A place called Boulder on the wild Colorado
I slipped and fell into the wet concrete below
They buried me in that grey tomb that knows no sound
But I am still around
I'll always be around, and around and around and around
and around...

I fly a starship
Across the Universe divide
And when I reach the other side
I'll find a place to rest my spirit if I can
Perhaps I may become a highwayman again
Or I may simply be a single drop of rain
But I will remain
And I'll be back again, and again and again and again
and again...

"The Highwayman," The Highwaymen

Gene Wolfe is easily the least well known of all the authors in this essay. Despite earning high praise in the realm of science fiction—appearing in interview panels with his more famous contemporaries Isaac Asimov or Harlan Ellison—Wolfe is largely unknown to the greater literary world. Yet writers who have earned fame outside their chosen genres praise Wolfe unreservedly. Ursula Le Guin, for instance, calls him "Our Melville" (Pontin). Neil Gaiman, famous (with Terry Pratchett) for *Good Omens,* exhorts his readers in a whimsical essay titled "How to Read Gene Wolfe," to

> Look at Gene: a genial smile (the one they named for him), pixie-twinkle in his eyes, a reassuring mustache. Listen to that chuckle. Do not be lulled. He holds all the cards: he has five aces in his hand, and several more up his sleeve…He has an engineer's mind that takes things apart to see how they work and then puts them back together… An explorer, who set out for uncharted territory and brought back maps, and if he said "Here There Be Dragons," by God, you knew that was where the dragons were" (Gaiman 4).

In a similarly whimsical essay titled "The Wolf in the Labyrinth," Michael Swanwick says

> The congressman and frontier yarn-spinner Davy Crockett claimed to know of a buffalo so large that it took three men to see all of it. Gene Wolfe is something like that wonderful buffalo. His virtues as a writer are so great and so many that a recitation of them tends to make him blend into the sky. Here's the short version: Wolfe is so extremely smart that he stands out even in a field that routinely attracts savants, autodidacts, brilliant loners, and wild talents (Swanwick 82).

High praise. Not only is Wolfe the least well-known of my authors in this document, but it seems that he is also the most gushed-over.

Despite appearing to many (especially Swanwick) as something akin to the gargantuan and enigmatic face of Sunday, Wolfe himself is rather humble. Born in 1931, Wolfe spent his early childhood in Illinois, but grew up in Houston, where he attended Lamar High School and then Texas A&M. However, Wolfe dropped out of college and was drafted. He fought in Korea as a combat engineer and, according to an interview with the MIT Technological Review, "returned home, by his own account, 'a mess:' 'I'd hit the floor at the slightest noise.'" Wolfe's future wife Rosemary, "he says simply, 'saved me'" (Pontin). Wolfe married Rosemary, and converted to her Catholic faith, though he grew up Presbyterian (Bebergal). He went on to attend the University of Houston, earn a degree in mechanical engineering, work at Procter & Gamble—where he invented the machine used to make Pringles potato chips—become editor of "Plant Engineering," and eventually become a full-time author after the success of *The Book of the New Sun*. Jason Pontin notes that Wolfe's enormous reputation is

> based on 30 novels, including a mainstream volume, *Peace* (1975),and many short story collections and chapbooks, but mostly upon his masterpiece, the tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun* (1980–1983), which is set in a distant future when the sun is dying and humanity exhausted (Pontin).

In person, "Wolfe is large, kindly, and unfailingly courteous," despite Rosemary's recent death in 2013 (Pontin). When asked what writers most influenced his writing, Wolfe cites "G. K. Chesterton…Marks' [Standard] Handbook for [Mechanical] Engineers," and, as a boy, "all the pulp magazines" (Pontin).

As an engineer, Wolfe approaches religion in a different way than most. When asked why pain, for instance, wasn't a theological difficulty for him, Wolfe replied that "If you catch a dragonfly and bend the end of its body up, it will eat itself until it dies. When people have had

their mouths numbed for dentistry, they must be warned not to chew their tongues," in short, that "pain may be a necessary design feature that the Divine Engineer put into his animated machines" (Pontin). However, Wolfe's remarks on the subject of science fiction smack of Tolkien-esque attitude:

> You could write a book about a landing on Mars in which a landing on Mars is a metaphor for something that is going on now. You could also write a book about a landing on Mars that's a landing on Mars (Pontin).

Rather than make his stories a commentary on the modern day, Wolfe seems instead to delight in leaving references to modern day in his stories to particularly careful readers. As peter Bebergal writes in a New Yorker article titled "Sci-Fi's Difficult Genius,"

> The setting appears medieval, but slowly we tease out that what is ancient to these characters was once our own possible future. A desert's sands are the glass of a great city, and the creaking steel walls that make up Severian's cell in the guild dormitory is likely an ancient spaceship…In the early part of the first novel, "The Shadow of the Torturer," Severian is given more responsibility in the guild and finds himself in chambers he was once denied access to. In one, he sees a dusty and faded picture he describes as "an armored figure standing in a desolate landscape. It had no weapon, but held a staff bearing a strange, stiff banner." Careful readers will realize this as a photograph of the first moon landing (Bebergal; *Shadow & Claw* 36).

His epigraph to *The Shadow of the Torturer* sheds a little light on Wolfe's imagination: "A thousand ages in thy sight / are like an evening gone. / Short as the watch that ends the night /

before the rising sun" (*Shadow & Claw* 8). These lines, from a hymn "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," hint at the key in understanding Wolfe's work.

Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* is a rambling, almost picaresque tetralogy centered on a young man named Severian. "The books tell how Severian, a journeyman of the Guild of Torturers, is exiled for the sin of mercy, takes to the road, fights in a war, and becomes the ruler of Urth" (Pontin). *The Book of the New Sun* is set on Earth, but millions of years in the future, where interstellar travel is ancient, forgotten history, and the sun is growing so old and red that you can see the stars during the day, and the sky is black. Severian, when he becomes Autarch, is tasked with bringing about the appearance of the "new sun," simultaneously the rebirth of the dwindling star and the ancient Conciliator, "who walked among us eons ago," and who will one day return (*Shadow & Claw* 119). Wolfe's setting thus begs a certain question: the author of Ecclesiastes says that "one generation departs and another generation comes, but the world forever stays…nothing is new under the sun!" (Ecclesiastes 1:4;9). Is there anything new under the new sun? In an extreme of human society, in which everything that is familiar to us readers is long, long gone—in which our distance future is still ancient history—how will we relate to ourselves…to God?

Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Book of the Long Sun*, and his short stories seem to me primarily a meditation on this: that even if the churches of the Catholic religion crumble, her popes die off, and her beliefs are forgotten, there will still be people who are converted by it. Wolfe utilizes the fantastic imagination of Tolkien to examine a Chestertonian mystery: that, like O'Connor writes, the divine Eros finds its way into the lives of the beloved of God, even through debased avenues. "In *The Book of the New Sun*," says Wolfe,

> I wanted to show a man who was raised to do terrible things and who reforms himself from inside. And so I thought up the Guild of Torturers and made the man a torturer. And in *The Book of the Long Sun*, I wanted to show another kind of man, brought up in a bad religion, working his way through it. So I came up with a fake religion in which the personalities of a long-ago tyrant and his family have been elevated to godhood in an artificial world (Pontin).

Courting Valeria

Wolfe's Catholic imagery in *The Book of the New Sun* makes it clear that Severian's journey isn't necessarily the journey of Christ, as some have speculated, but definitely the journey of a saint back to the Church he knew as a child. Like O'Connor, Wolfe's tetralogy hinges on a moment of conversion (we will see this as well with *The Book of the Long Sun*). The first book, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, begins with a narrative of Severian saving the life of Vodalus, a Robin Hood-esque rebel against the Autarch, while in the necropolis (city-size graveyard) after dark. However, the second chapter explains how Severian came to be in the necropolis after dark in the first place—it's not a place where he's allowed to go. Severian describes a pond which he and his fellow apprentices would sneak off to go swimming. The pond is thick with floating plants called "nenuphars:" "Under flower and leaves are black roots as fine and as strong as hair…On the day I was to save Vodalus I dove beneath their crowded pads as I had done a thousand times. I did not come up" (*Shadow & Claw* 19). Severian very nearly drowns in the black pond, hallucinating vividly of a dead, barely remembered mentor, a woman's screams, and the face of another woman "as immense as the green face of the moon" (*Shadow & Claw* 20). The woman pushes him down into what Severian thinks is the mud, but is actually the surface. As Cecilia Lopez observes in an essay titled "Art and Allegory: A Method

to Read *The Book of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe," "Severian's initial drowning two years before his exile is a baptism, although that can only be deduced retrospectively" (Lopez 150). It is this drowning, both as an event and as a sacramental reality, which allows Severian's encounter with Vodalus to be fruitful: "Severian's admiration of Vodalus defending a woman within an hour of his drowning has no source in Severian's environment or education" (Lopez 150). It is the beginning of his "reform from the inside."

Severian's slow journey of conversion is mediated through one of the ultimate symbols of the tetralogy: the Claw of the Conciliator, for which the second book in the series is named. The Claw is initially a gem seemingly imbued with power to heal and light. "Severian comes to realize that he can sometimes—not always—heal people with a touch from the glowing artifact. Only gradually does it become revealed to the reader that the Claw is believed to be a relic of Christ" (Farrell 28). In a battle with a giant, the gem is shattered, revealing "a claw as long as the last joint of my smallest finger, cruelly hooked and needle-pointed, the reality of that dark core at the heart of the gem, which must have been no more than a container" (*Sword & Citadel* 199). Persevering in the mistaken notion that the object is indeed a claw, Severian continues on his adventures, eventually returning the Claw to its rightful owners—a religious group known as the Pelarines. However, in one of the last scenes of the book, Severian finds himself on a beach.

> A thorn caught my forearm and broke from its branch, remaining embedded in my skin, with a scarlet drop of blood, no bigger than a grain of millet, at its tip. I plucked it out—then fell to my knees.
>
> It was the Claw…all that bush and all the other bushes growing with it were covered in white blossoms and these perfect Claws" (*Sword & Citadel* 366-67).

The reader realizes that the Claw wasn't ever a claw, but a thorn from Christ's crown. However, Severian doesn't know this, deriving an entirely different meaning:

> the thorn was a sacred Claw because all thorns were sacred Claws; the sand in my boots was sacred because it came from a beach of sacred sand…all the world was a relic. I drew off my boots…so that I might not walk shod on holy ground (*Sword & Citadel* 367).

Not an unfitting conclusion, however—it is actually a remarkably incarnational inspiration: if the Conciliator truly "walked among us," then the whole of Urth is holy.

This insight doesn't conclude Wolfe's tetralogy, however. Before Severian embarks on the journey that will bring about the new sun, he retraces the steps he once wandered as a child—into the Atrium of Time. Connected mysteriously to the Guild of Torturers' hall, and to the rest of the city, through a series of tunnels, the Atrium of Time is inhabited by only two people: an old woman, and a young woman who is ostensibly her daughter. Severian learns the young woman's name when there as a child: Valeria. "She looked younger than I, but there was an antique quality about her metal-trimmed dress and the shadow of her dark hair that made her seem older than Master Palaemon, a dweller in forgotten yesterdays" (*Shadow & Claw* 34). Lopez observes astutely that "Valeria personifies the Church as both old and young, with whom [Severian] is reunited at the end" (Lopez 150). This personification is reinforced by Latin inscriptions—the universal language of the Catholic church—on the walls of the Atrium: "Lux dei vitae viam monstrat," the light of God shows the way of life, or, as Valeria translates, "the beam of the New Sun lights the way of life" (*Shadow & Claw* 34). It is revealed after the story ends, that Severian marries Valeria, consummating the trek of a convert to union with the Church.

The Outsider

A similar conversion is the subject of *The Book of the Long Sun*, this time, of a priest named Patera Silk (Patera is a title, similar to the Latin 'pater,' which means 'father') on a generation ship called the Whorl. The two tetralogies are loosely connected: the Whorl was launched by an egomaniacal tyrant named Typhon, who Severian encounters and kills. Silk is a priest of the techno-pantheon of gods built into the Whorl—artificial intelligences based on Typhon's extended family. The priests of this religion sacrifice animals before "sacred windows," in hopes that a god will appear and grace them with a blessing. Christopher Beiting, in an essay titled "The Divine Interregnum in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Short Sun*," observes that "those elements of the religion that are not Greco-Roman in nature are based on a parody of far-future Catholicism" ("Interregnum" 63). However, like the Greek pantheon, the gods squabbled amongst themselves, and, sometime in the past, the minor gods rose up and overthrew (deleted) Pas—the king of the gods, modeled after Typhon.

> Book of the Long Sun opens at a point of crisis: after three hundred years of travel, Pas has apparently been destroyed, civilization aboard the Whorl has degenerated to a level resembling Renaissance Italy, the Whorl has arrived at its destination (a star system containing two habitable worlds, called simply "Blue" and "Green") with no one knowing how to disembark, and the Whorl's systems are starting to fail, endangering everyone on board ("Interregnum" 63).

It is in this landscape that Wolfe chooses to place his protagonist, Patera Silk, and have him wrestle with his indoctrinated religion and the inspiration of the One True God.

Reflecting the centrality of conversion in this text, *The Book of the Long Sun* opens with the moment of revelation: Patera Silk, in the middle of a ballgame, receives a message from a

minor god of the pantheon, a god which he has taken to calling "the Outsider." The passage is a beautifully imagined revelation—Wolfe goes out of his way to avoid the clichés of divine inspiration, like a voice out of the sky, or an angel appearing. Instead,

> Enlightenment came to Patera Silk on the ball court; nothing could ever be the same after that…it was as though someone who had always been behind him and standing (as it were) at both his shoulders had, after so many years of pregnant silence, begun to whisper in both his ears…He, young Patera Silk (that absurd clockwork figure), watched outside a clockwork show whose works had stopped…it was the voices that mattered, only paired voices (though there were more, he felt sure, if only he had the ears for them) and all the rest an empty show, shown to him that he might know it for what it was, spread for him so that he might know how precious it was, though its shining clockwork had gone some trifle awry and must be set right by him; for this he was born (*Litany of the Long Sun* 7;8).

This description of the Outsider, who the reader begins to realize is actually the One True God, is entirely in line with a Catholic theology: God is "infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself," an outsider to the machinations of the world, though, "at every time and in every place, God draws close to man" (CCC 1).

Silk's epiphany is the starting point and catalyst for the rest of the tetralogy. Silk has to wrestle with the meaning of the message, how he should carry it out, and what he should do afterwards. As Beiting wrote in another essay, "when the divine reveals itself directly to humanity…we often make mistakes in how we understand the experience" ("Irruption" 86). Silk is a good man in a grotesque religion who genuinely loves his parishioners and students, but as

such “like so many humble and holy people throughout human history, Silk fails to understand the divine command completely, setting in motion a chain of events that tear apart his city, his religion, and his world” (“Irruption” 92). The rest, as they say, is history. The driving point in the story is the conflict between Silk’s preconceived notions of how the world (Whorl) works and the inspiration of the Outsider—and this catalyst sustains the story in an engaging and interesting way for seven books (the four of *Long Sun*, and then three of *Short Sun*). As Beiting observes,

> The novels close with an aged Daisy, Horn’s daughter-in-law, watching the slow departure of the Whorl through a telescope. “Good fishing! Good fishing! Good fishing! Good fishing! Good fishing!”59 she cries out to the descendants of Silk and his people, perhaps wishing them to catch new worlds, or perhaps to become new fishers of men (“Interregnum” 83).

The Everlasting Man

Wolfe’s primary intuition about the world—and this plays itself out across his short stories as well—seems to be that, contra the theses of his contemporary science fiction writers, it is not science, but fiction, that has the ability to deny human nature. The essential human interplay of grace and sin remains whether you’re on an aging Urth or a distant planet. Like the epigraph I chose for this section, Wolfe’s primary intuition is that the face of men may change—men may die in a thousand different ways in a thousand different occupations—but there remains a continuity of nature: the spacefaring starship captain is not so far removed from the highwayman.

“Reality is a crutch for people who can’t handle science fiction,” Wolfe said in an interview (“Gene Wolfe at NIU Library”). This is probably because, like O’Connor, really good science fiction must consist of a frank and sustained look at humanity in all its grotesqueness.

This doesn't mean the half-hearted and flimsy 'humanitarian' attitude of some authors—this gaze is unforgiving of human faults, attracted, by a kind of perverse holiness, to the ugly, the depraved. But also it includes the nostalgia of story, like Tolkien—in Wolfe's short story, "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" (by far his best, in my opinion), the main character, Tackie, is sad that his book is ending and the characters will die. One of the characters—an imaginary friend Tackie conjures up—observes that "if you start the book again, we'll all be back…It's the same with you, Tackie, You're too young to realize it yet, but it's the same with you" (*The Best of Gene Wolfe* 23).

The image of God, in an endless cycle of joy and suffering, reading and rereading the story of creation and salvation is not only Catholic—it is powerful. It is no accident that the word 'celebration' implies such a cycle.

Conclusion

Sing, my tongue, the Savior's glory,
Of His Flesh, the mystery sing;
Of the Blood, all price exceeding,
Shed by our Immortal King,
Destined, for the world's redemption,
From a noble Womb to spring.

Down in adoration falling,
this great sacrament we hail,
over ancient forms of worship
Newer rites of grace prevail:
Faith for all defects supplying,
When the feeble senses fail.

To the Everlasting Father
And the Son makes us free
With the Holy Ghost proceeding
Forth from each eternally,
Be salvation, honor, blessing,
Might and endless majesty.
Amen. Alleluia.

I will end this document—a culmination, as I think of it, of my work and thinking at this university—with a reflection on why Catholics write.

As I have said above, Catholics don't seem inclined to write—as our separated Protestant brethren are—allegorically, for the purposes of teaching or rebuking. Although there is definitely allegory extant within Chesterton, Tolkien, O'Connor, and Wolfe, such allegory is secondary to the story—the story isn't meant to teach a lesson or give a specific meaning.

However, I would also hesitate to say that the Catholic literary imagination isn't aimed at delivering something—if not a message, then an experience. What kind of experience, then? Certainly one which causes the reader to lift their heart—only, this is not the 'uplifting' story which sappy optimists ask for.

I have written before on the nature of the end of a book. The end of a book instills a kind of silence, a quietness or serenity at the last word. I think, having reflected on these authors (and on others which I did not include here), that this silence is the uplifting of the human heart—a prayer, as St. Thesese would call it—in thanksgiving for an experience. We have run the race, we have weathered the storm. We have chased Sunday with Syme, carried Frodo up Mount Doom. We have been violated with Tarwater. We have saved the Whorl with Silk.

> And the glory of the book goes on: as Gene Wolfe observes,
>
> And I read it, and I absolutely loved it, and when I had read the last page I went back to the first page, and I started again. And when I started my fourth reading I thought, 'Well, I know everything that's going to happen now and I'll just put it aside for a while until I've kind of forgotten it, and then I'll read it again' (Pontin).

With our Father (who is younger than we), we may rejoice in a creation again and again.

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